IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows.

1. (original) A method of stereospecifically preparing a 3-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenin or a derivative thereof, which comprises reducing a3-keto-5β-H steroidal sapogenin using a reducing agent comprising a hindered organoborane or an organo-aluminium hydride.

2. (original) A method according to claim 1, wherein the reducing agent is a hindered organoborane reagent in which organic groups contain more than two carbon atoms and the sapogenin obtained is predominantly a 3β-hydroxy, 5β-H- sapogenin.

3. (currently amended) A method according to claim 1~~ or claim 2~~, wherein hindered organoborane is selected from lithium tri-*sec*-butylborohydride, potassium tri-*sec*-butylborohydride, sodium tri-*sec*-butylborohydride, lithium trisiamylborohydride, potassium trisiamylborohydride, potassium triphenylborohydride and lithium triphenylborohydride.

4. (original) A method according to claim 3, wherein the hindered organoborane is lithiumtri-*sec*-butylborohydride.

5. (original) A method according to claim 1, wherein the organo-aluminium hydride is lithium tri-*tert*-butoxyaluminohydride.

6. (currently amended) A method according to ~~any one of the preceding claims~~claim 1, wherein the molar ratio of the predominant sapogenin obtained to the alternative 3-epimer, is at least about 10:1.

7. (original) A method according to claim 6, wherein the ratio is at least about 15:1.

8. (currently amended) A method according to ~~any one of the preceding claims~~claim 1,

when performed in an organic solvent selected from tetrahydrofuran, toluene, tert-butyl methyl ether,diethoxymethane, 1,4-dioxan,2-methyltetrahydrofuran and any mixture thereof.

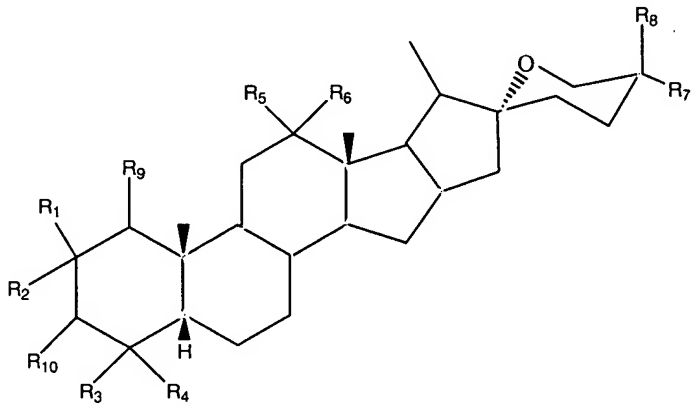
9. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of tetrahydrofuran.

10. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of toluene.

11. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentially of 1, 4-dioxan.

12. (original) A method according to claim 8, wherein the organic solvent consists essentiallyof 2-methyltetrahydrofuran.

13. (currently amended) A method according to ~~any one of the preceding claims~~claim 1, wherein the desired sapogenin is a compound of general formula.



wherein R_1, R_2, R_3, R_4, R_5, R_6, R_7, R_8 and R_9 are, independently of each other, H, C_{1-4} alkyl, OH, or OR (where R = C_{6-12} aryl or C_{1-4} alkyl), or R_5 and R_6 together may represent a =O (carbonyl) or

protected carbonyl group, the stereochemistry at carbon centre 3 can be either R or S, and R_{10} represents OH, an O-linked sugar group or any organic ester group.

14. (original) A method according to claim 13, wherein the sapogenin is selected from sarsasapogenin, episarsasapogenin, smilagenin, epismilagenin and esters thereof.

15. (currently amended) A method according to ~~any one of the preceding claims~~claim 1, wherein the 3- keto, 5β-H steroidal sapogenin starting material is prepared by heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation of a corresponding Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin to convert the Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin at least predominantly to the said 5β-H, 3-ketone.

16. (original) A method according to claim 15, wherein the heterogeneous catalytic hydrogenation is performed using hydrogen and a palladium catalyst in an organic solvent.

17. (original). A method according to claim 16, wherein the palladium catalyst is present on a support.

18. (currently amended) A method according to ~~any one of claims 15 to 17~~claim 15, wherein the Δ^4, 3-keto steroidal sapogenin is diosgenone.

19. (original) A method according to claim 18, wherein the diosgenone is obtained by oxidationof diosgenin.

20. (original) A method for the conversion of 3α-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenins and derivatives thereof to 3β-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenins and derivatives thereof, which comprises contacting a 3-hydroxy-activated derivative of a 3α-hydroxy-5β-H steroidal sapogenin with a nucleophile under conditions favouring nucleophilic substitution with inversion at the 3-position, with optional subsequent adjustment of the 3-substituent as desired.